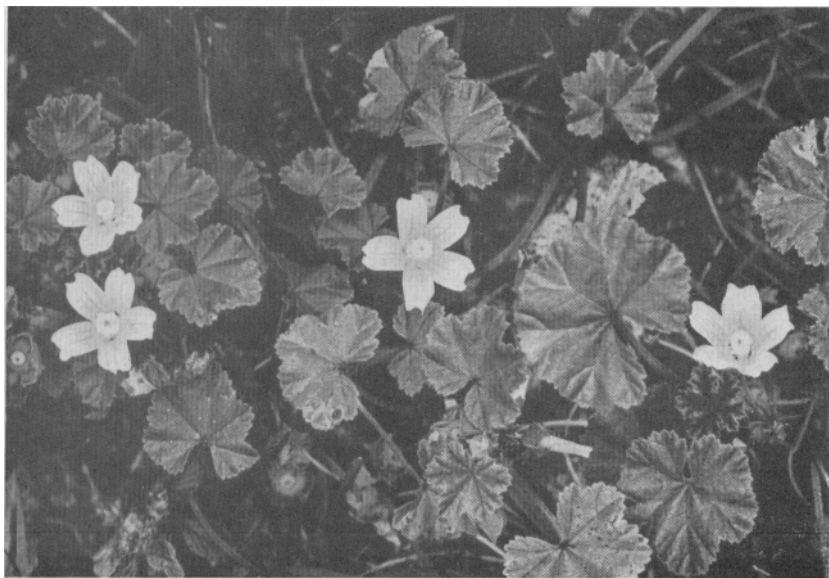


WEEDS

by

Anna Pedersen Kummer



Mallows

THE CHICAGO ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

LINCOLN PARK AT CLARK AND OGDEN AVENUE

CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS

WEEDS

ANNA PEDERSEN KUMMER

"A *weed* is a plant that is growing where it is not wanted." This definition, volunteered by a high school botany student, can scarcely be improved upon.

The study of weeds is open to every natural history enthusiast, even the city apartment dweller. Curbs, vacant lots, and roadsides furnish material that no one begrudges the taking, nor does the collector's conscience ever suffer uneasiness. Naming the most common species is the first step; few people can indentify the ragweeds of the Chicago Region although almost everybody talks about them.



Golden-rods, Blue Vervain and Michaelmas Daisies

Weed habitats and growth habits are bound to interest one who knows a few species. The seemingly frail chickweed may germinate and come into bloom by May fifteenth, the giant ragweed reaches a height of ten feet in its growing season of a single summer. The carpet weed germinates late in the sunny side-walk cracks and within a few weeks develops thousands of seeds that are *fine* as dust.

Weeds are the farmers' traditional enemies. The Canada thistle means discomfort to the city trumper in clearings of the Forest Preserves; to, the farmer it means the fouling of the ground it infests. It is proscribed by state law as is the bindweed with its pretty morning flowers. The horse nettle has vicious spines and its roots defy extermination. Frenchweed gives dairy products an odor that butter experts say cannot be eliminated. The flower-of-an-hour attracts the passerby; to the farmer it is a serious pest.

Nevertheless, weeds are not all without beauty and many are actually cultivated in flower gardens. Wild carrot is one of our laciest plants; of all flower colors the yellow of the tall buttercup seems the most dazzling; the ephemeral flowers of chicory and moth mullein are exquisite in the early morning. And where, at least in this latitude, can one find



Bouncing Bet

more curious plants than among the weeds? The leaves of the common mullein are woolly to the touch like the *fleece* of a sheep-skin coat; the nettle's stinging hairs feel like so many Lilliputian harpoons; plump purslane refuses to die, each fragment of the uprooted plant may be the beginning of a new one. The pod of the milkweed has never failed to fascinate even the most casual observer.

The *weed scene* is not the same year in and year out; a species abundant one year may be nearly absent in another. The nature and drainage of the soil, the spacing of the summer rains, the date of the last spring frost are some of the factors that determine what weeds shall dominate an area in a given year. Water hemlock becomes especially abundant after heavy spring rains. Late summer drouth favors the growth of Russian thistle whereas the continued dryness of an old gravel dump is ideal for the prickly buffalo bur.

Weeds are indicators of grosser environmental differences as well. The sunflower that is abundant in vacant lots and roadsides of Gary, Indiana, is not the same species as the Chicago sunflower. It is an immigrant from the more arid West that has found the sandy soil to its liking. A succession of dry years will be marked by the presence of weeds that no one remembers having seen in the region; the return of the wetter portion of the cycle causes their complete disappearance.

Man is the greatest distributor of weeds. A gum-plant in the Chicago Region, far out of its range, makes one wonder how it got here. Frenchweed may indicate a shipment of freight from the Northwest. Railroad rights-of-way are homes of a cosmopolitan population, waifs from regions far and near. But how can one account for the sudden appearance of a new *weed* in an area that has been observed for years? And how can a species of *Eupatorium* persist in the changed habitat of parking stations and river banks of the near north side quite as though Chicago were not there at all?

The serious student of classification of plants finds weeds a real challenge. The rare or gorgeous flowers often require for their identification only that the observer be not color-blind. Weeds are more difficult. Let the student master six of the simpler smartweeds; then if he feels self-satisfied, let him proceed to the goosefoots and finally the delightful genus *Bidens*.

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